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ABSTRACT

Writing research has indicated that exophoric reference--features of linguistic texts that refer to the situations that surround language--are more characteristic of weak writing and possibly associated with socioeconomic status. To follow up on such research, writing samples from 114 ninth and eleventh grade students and college freshmen were collected along with a teacher's interpretations of the students' socioeconomic status based on students' school records. The students were asked to look at four drawings and then write a description of the actions they contain to someone who cannot see the illustrations. With each grade level the number of total words produced in response to the assigned task increased significantly. The calculated rates of exophoric references, however, were not significant for either grade or socioeconomic status, although the rate of exophoric reference appeared to stay the same or decline slightly across grade levels. Contrary to previous research, the students in this study were able to produce explicit, context-independent writing, regardless of student socioeconomic status. (The drawings used in the study and three student responses are appended.) (RL)

Written Texts and Situational Contexts

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The research which is the focus of these remarks should be understood as a somewhat awkward probe into a complex relationship, that between written texts and situational contexts. The probe was awkward because of problems at the data-gathering stage, problems which certainly affect the validity and generalizability of my results. Even when the product of research is inadequate, however, the process can be illuminating. In this report I'll share that process and discuss the product only with appropriate cautions.

The probe was conceived as part of a series of investigations which attempt to account for inexplicit meaning in student writing. Inexplicit meaning is characteristic of basic writing, as in this tenth grader's paragraph:

> I saw another fight before at the playground over some candy one kid have a bag of candy and this boy took the bag a eatin a piece of his candy he hit him in the arm the boy who took the candy kicked him in the face and he got a black eye so the boy who was punching him stop and walk out of the playground, with his friend talking about how hard he hit him in the face.

Clearly, this paragraph is context-dependent. The writer appears to assume that his reader has access to the context of situation referred to in the writing, to the actual fight witnessed by the writer. Key components of that context are only referred to, not adequately specified or represented, in the writing. For example, the in the playground (lines 1 and 6) is used as a deictic; it points toward the environment of the reported events as if the reader had seen this particular playground. The fighters, furthermore, are initially referred to as one kid and this boy (line 2), and by the time we get to he hit him in the arm (line 3), we can't tell who hit whom. Readers need access to the original situational context to understand this text.

In my semantic abbreviation studies (Collins, 1981; Collins and Williamson, 1981a and b), I attributed inexplicit meaning in student writing to the writer's tendency to transform inner speech only to the extent necessary to meet the dialogic form and interpersonal function of everyday spoken language. In this interpretation, our tenth grade writer is writing as if he were talking to a close friend who had also witnessed the fight. These studies drew on Vygotsky's (1934/1962 and 1978) theories of relationships among thought, language and writing and used exophoric references (Halliday and Hasan, 1976) as one measure of a writer's tendency to produce writing through the mediation of spoken language.

By exophoric reference Halliday and Hasan mean features of linguistic texts that refer to the situation that surrounds language. They define reference as one form of cohesion, a semantic tie between a presupposing element and another element which satisfies or completes the presupposition. Reference can be either endophoric, in which case both the presupposing and the presupposed elements are found within the text, or exophoric, in which case the presupposed element is to be found outside of the text. In the example I presented earlier, the in the

playground and this in this boy are examples of demonstrative exophora; he and him are examples of personal exophora.

The semantic abbreviation studies found that exophoric reference is more characteristic of weak writing, judged by primary trait scoring, than of its strong counterpart at grades 8 and 12. That observation was seen as supporting the theory that weak writers resort to the forms and function of spoken dialogue while writing.

British researchers, however, used exophoric reference and inexplicit meaning to support a somewhat different theory, and it is that fact which prompted me to undertake the present study. Research reported by Peter Hawkins (1977) showed that significantly more working class children use items of exophoric reference, particularly third person pronouns, than do middle class children; this latter group had an observed preference for parts of speech associated with the noun. Hawkins concludes that these findings support Bernstein's (1975) theory of socially determined "restricted" and "elaborated" linguistic codes. Now, Bernstein's theory has not fared well in this country. It quickly became associated with a linguistic deprivation hypothesis which many studies refuted. In studies relevant to basic writing, we've shown ourselves to be more inclined toward psychological explanations, such as Piaget's (1926/1955) concept of egocentrism, than toward socioeconomic ones. Some examples: Basic writers have not attained a concept-forming level of cognitive development (Lunsford, 1979); in matters of coherence, some adult writers are like young children (Brostoff, 1981); even Shaughnessy (1977) attributes problems in basic writing beyond the syntactic level to the writer's egocentricity. Still, there are a few studies which suggest that societal influences have something to do with language development (Loban, 1976) and writing performance (Elsasser and John-Steiner, 1977; Farrell, 1977). With these latter studies in mind (and with a basic distrust of

..the explanatory power of egocentrism), I decided to replicate a portion of the Hawkins research in order to look for a correlation between inexplicit writing and socioeconomic status.

As part of his research Hawkins used an illustrated narrative (see attached) which tells a story of three boys playing soccer, breaking a window , getting yelled at, and running away. Bernstein (1975, p. 178) and Hawkins (1977, pp.75-6) offer the following example of a context-dependent, inexplicit, response to the task:

> They're playing football and he kicks it and goes through there it breaks the window and they're looking at it and he comes out and shouts at them because they've broken it so they run away and then she looks out and she tells them off.

If we compare this example with the tenth grader's paragraph discussed earlier, we notice the same tendency to refer to a situational context outside of the linguistic text. This observation led me to borrow the Hawkins illustrated narrative and administer it as a writing task to students in grades 4-13 which was worded as follows:

> These four drawings tell a story. Imagine that someone you know wants to know all about the story but won't be able to look at the drawings. Write a description of what you see in the pictures so that the person you are writing to will understand the story. Tell as much information about the story as you think your reader will need..

The Hawkins research used an oral interview method, and I wanted to see if asking students to write to someone who cannot see the illustrations would prompt writers to produce relatively explicit meaning in their responses, regardless of grade level or socioeconomic background.

Two disappointments entered into my attempt to test that assumption. After working with a group of teachers who had agreed to let me observe their language arts classes in grades four through eight in preparation for my administering the writing task, I was told that I needed permission to continue. I wrote a requested research proposal, and permission was promptly denied. At the secondary level, I managed to obtain writing samples, but I was denied access to school records of parental occupations and educational levels, information necessary to assign writers to SES categories. The school permitted me to obtain a teacher's interpretation of school records, and I decided to go ahead with this somewhat less than objective data. (Hence, my opening disclaimer concerning validity and generalizability.)

I was left with sufficient data at grades 9, 11, and 13 (total N=114). The observed means for total words by grade and SES are presented in Table 1 (and remember that the SES classification is rather arbitrary):

Table 1

Mean Number of Total Words
by Grade and SES

	9	11	13
Low	108	147	174
Mid	101	133	172

Differences between grades in this table are significant for total words ($p < .0001$).

Calculations of rates of exophoric reference were figured as frequency per total words. The page in my handout labeled "Sample Responses" (see attached) will illustrate the manner in which exophoric items were identified. The first version of the story has two instances of demonstrative exophora; both occur when there is used to locate characters (line 1) and an aspect of setting (line 3) by making reference to the context of situation represented in the illustration. The second version repeats this pattern by again opening with the word there, used exophorically. I've included the third sample response because it illustrates one solution to the problem of making distinctions among characters and aspects of setting in the illustrated narrative; this solution is to provide names: Rufus, Monty, and Dick; the window of Monique's Massage Parlor.

Calculated rates of exophoric reference are shown in Table 2. Differences in this table are not significant for either grade or SES.

Table 2.

Mean Rate of Exophoric References
by Grade and SES
(Expressed as Percentage)

	9	11	13
Low	2.7	1.8	1.7
Mid	2.7	2.5	2.0

In the sample of student writing used in this probe, only one trend is visible. With each grade level the number of total words produced in response to the assigned task increased significantly. If we use combined means for rate of exophoric reference (grade 9 = 2.7%; grade 11 = 2.3%; grade 13 = 1.9%), we drop the SES variable which was of questionable validity, and we notice that the rate of exophoric reference stays about the same, or declines slightly across

grade levels. This suggests that writers in the study have very little difficulty writing about the assigned illustrated narrative in a context-independent manner.

These findings, of course, are very tentative; the study would have to be replicated with more objectivity at the data-gathering stage before we can be fully confident that the findings are accurate. Still, the findings are interesting enough to invite some speculation concerning relationships between written texts and contexts of situation.

... The present study seems to run against earlier ones; with very few exceptions, the writing task elicited a consistently low rate of exophoric reference.

It seems that the writing task reduced the level of difficulty inherent in writing about an assigned topic so that exophoric references were reduced to a minimum. The writing task presented writers with a complete and coherent universe, and writers were told that their reader would not have direct access to that universe. This is certainly a different context of situation than that used in the Bernstein and Hawkins interviews where it was clear, I suspect, that investigators could see the drawings. This is the difference between spoken dialogue and written monologue: when our audience can see what we're talking or writing about, we need not specify an already shared context of situation in the linguistic text. (Notice that I am not attempting to explain why Bernstein and Hawkins found social class differences among their subjects; Bernstein presents a powerful theoretical explanation for that himself; see also Kroll, in press.)

Apparently, it is a writer's ability to manage difficulties inherent in the writing task that makes a text more or less dependent on reader access to a context of situation. When difficulty is at a low level, as when we ask writers to represent a simple illustrated narrative for an absent reader of their choice, then writing is relatively context independent. The only problems in specifying

referents adequately in this task were in distinguishing among characters; most writers solved this by including relative heights and positions or by naming the characters. When the level of difficulty increases, for example when we ask writers to write a remembered or imagined narrative for an unfamiliar reader, many of the same writers might produce context-dependent writing (Kroll and Lempers, 1981; Kroll and Vann, 1981; Krauss and Glucksberg, 1977; Rubin, 1981, offer additional insight into task difficulty).

Certainly I don't mean to underestimate the complexities of relationships between written texts and contexts of situation. These contexts include the rhetorical (purpose, topic, audience), the environmental (conditions immediately surrounding the writer) and the societal (the socio-cultural background of writer and audience). Surely we need to know more about how these levels of context interact with psychological dimensions of writing processes, and we should investigate this interaction through context-dependent methods (Kantor, Kirby, and Goetz, 1981; Mishler, 1979). For now, though, I'm compelled to offer this tentative conclusion. Perhaps writers are not egocentric, and perhaps writing is not context-dependent. Perhaps these are labels for problems with writing tasks, not with writers or with writing. Maybe we call out a tendency toward "egocentric, context-dependent" writing by assignments that call for specialized writing that is simply too difficult for some writers to produce in isolation from necessary contexts. This argument suggests the need for carefully constructed assignments and reader responses that build upon what writers know and can do by asking them to connect their inner, personal worlds of motivation and thought with the outer, social world of experience and language.

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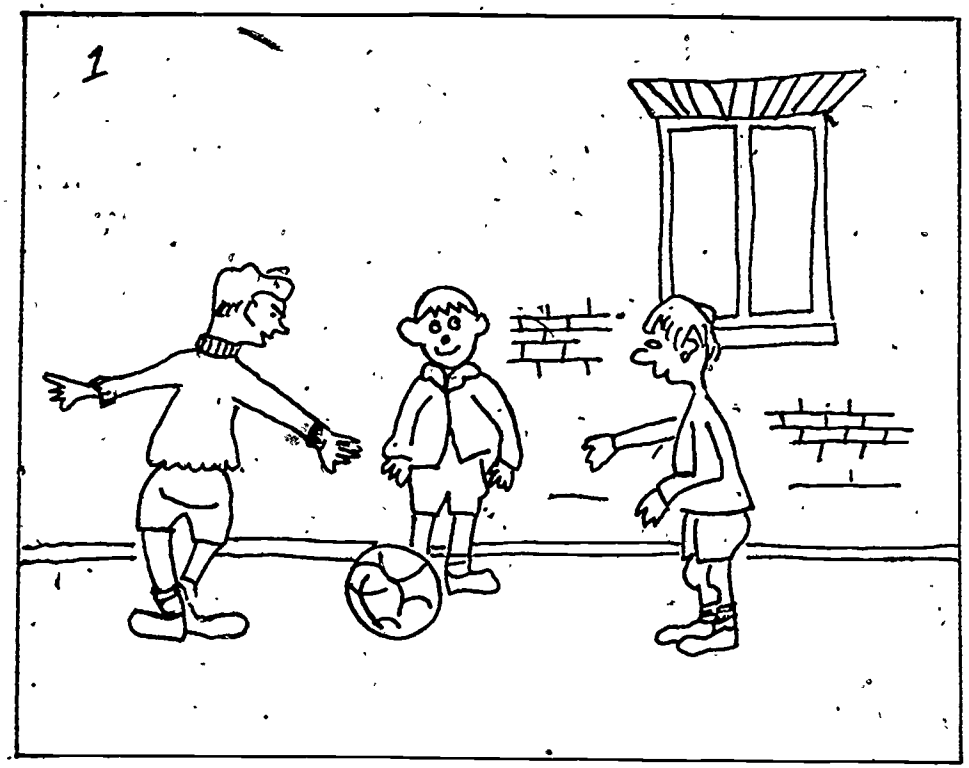
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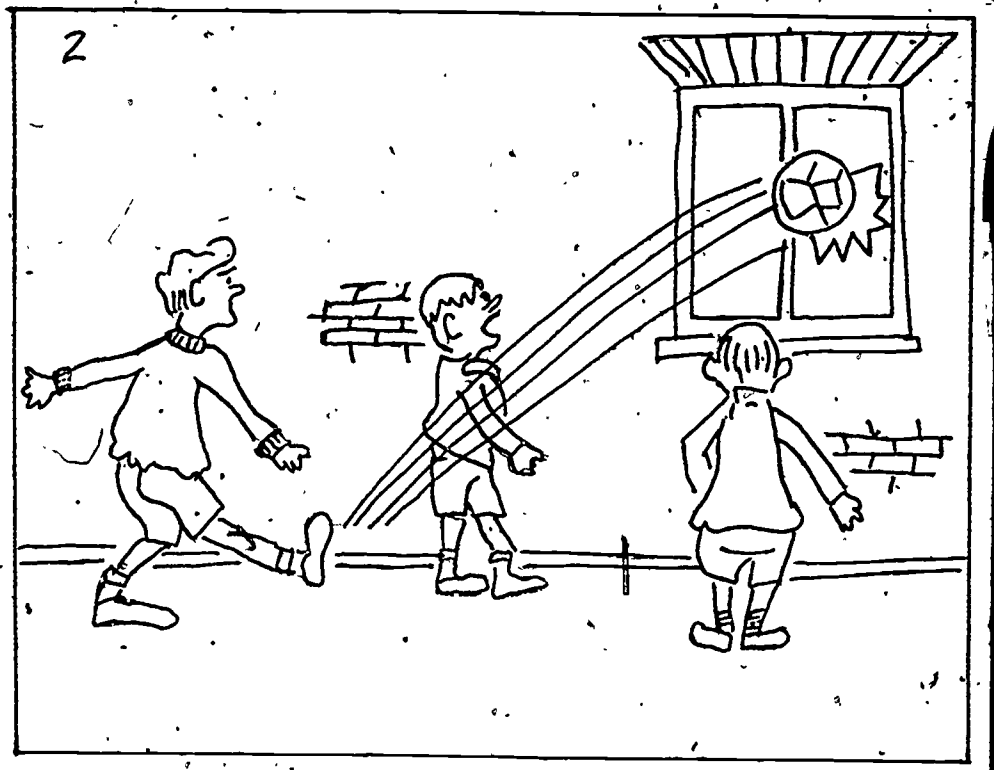
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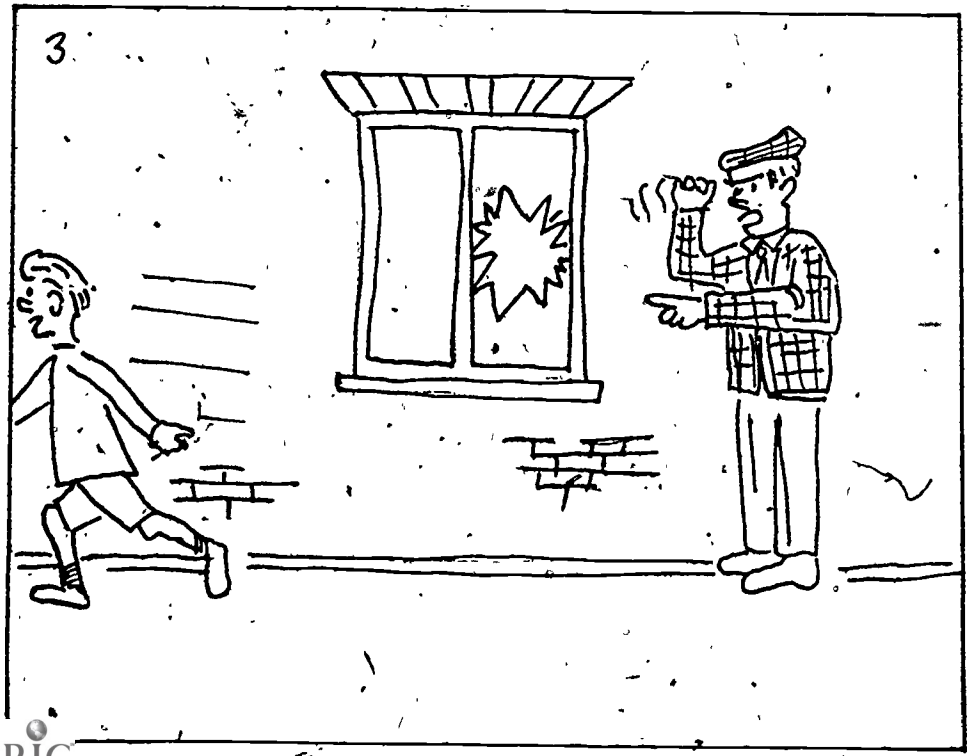
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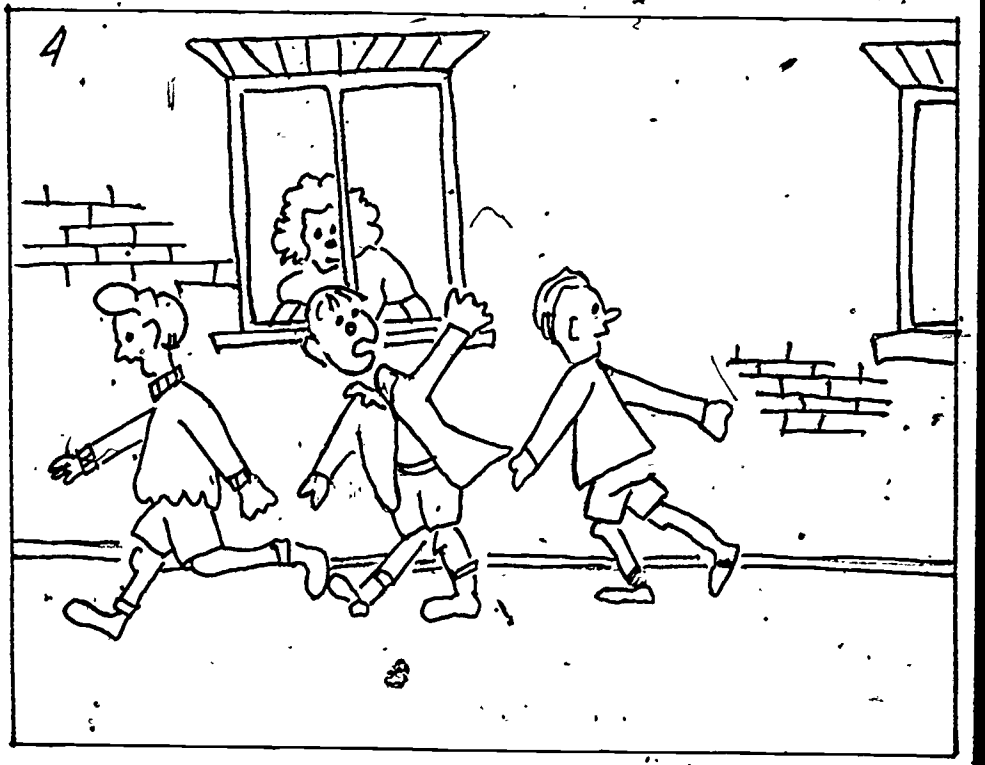
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Sample Responses:

There are four pictures which tells a story about three young boys beginning to kick a ball around. The boys are standing on a block where there is an apartment building. The boys are right in front of an apartment window. One boy gets ready to kick the ball. As he kicks the ball it goes straight towards the window. The ball goes threw the window and breaks it. The boys stand in amazement. Suddenly a man (presumably the owner of the apartment room comes over and starts screaming at the boys. The boys knowing there mistake ran away from the scene. Runing up the block they passed another apartment room with a girl watching them run.

There are three young fellows playing soccer in a small alley, with a window on one wall of the alley. The first young boy is the farthest a way from the window. He's about to kick the ball to one of the other one. He has a frown on his face.

After he kicks the ball it sails right through the window. The other boys seem to be yelling.

A man comes out, probably from the other side of the window. He starts yelling at the boy as they flee from the scene. They apparently don't care about the ball because as they run away, they don't have it with them.

They run down the alleyway past a girl in a window. The boy who kicked the ball is the first one to run. The second boy is yelling something to the man. He's also waving his arm and looking back. The 3rd boy is looking back too. The boy who kicked the ball doen't bother to look back, he just keeps running. They are all running past the girl in the window.

Three boys, Rufus, Monty, and Dicky, went to play with their new soccer ball. As they hopped to the park they kicked the ball between them. Monty accidently kicked the ball through the window of Monique's Massage Parlor. Well, the man who was about to get a massage was furious. He ran outside and yelled at the boys. "What the hell do you think you're doing? You scared the hell out of me! For all I knew, it could have been my wife spying on me! You kids have wasted up all my time with Rona, now. You'll pay for that." The boys got so scared they ran to the Aunt Monique, who had seen them run by. She also owned the Parlor. They explained to her the situation and she gave their ball back. As for the man from the Massage Parlor, his wife happened to be Rufus' sister, and Rufus told his sister who in turn divorced the man.